

INTERPRETIVE REPORT

'Voice' Chiefs Chafe at Curbs

By MARY McGRORY
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Henry Loomis, departing director of the Voice of America, made a farewell speech that had a special meaning for the people he left behind.

Every one present in the Departmental Auditorium knew what he meant when he said in the course of his lengthy remarks: "The Voice of America is not the voice of the administration."

This point has been at debate since the Voice was first heard some 20 years ago, and the controversy has heated up since the intensification of the war in South Viet Nam.

Old-timers in the Voice say they are going through a period almost as bad as the McCarthy era and—in a way—worse, as, in those days, the Voice pretended to be little but a propaganda arm.

In 1960, under President Eisenhower and after much study, the agency finally received a charter which gave it the green light to be candid and objective, in the manner of the British Broadcasting Corp.

"Heaviest" Censorship

But since the raids on Pleiku, say Voice officials, they have been chafing under the heaviest censorship in their history. No dispute over handling of news has arisen, but every commentary must be cleared with the policy department of the Voice's parent agency, the U.S. Information Agency, before broadcast.

The USIA has the benefit of

advice from the State Department and the White House, and Loomis said in his speech that the Voice's problem is not just to communicate with different cultures, "but with the rest of the government."

Voice officials have given up trying to reason with State Department policy makers who think Voice commentary should be as authoritative as a statement by the President or the secretary of state.

Others "downtown" think, according to Loomis and his associates, that nobody in foreign countries will know that something has happened if it is not mentioned on the Voice. In vain, they have pointed out that in many nations the listener has his choice of national radios.

Clashes With Agency

Last week brought two clashes within the agency over how the difference of opinion on our South Viet Nam policy should be reflected.

For a daily roundup of worldwide editorial opinion, the Voice included a critical, front-page editorial in the Paris newspaper "Le Monde." It was deleted downtown.

Again, a critical portion of a New York Times editorial, calling for a presidential statement on Viet Nam policy and advocating negotiation, was edited out of a Voice broadcast.

"We are getting so afraid to be honest, we can't even reflect any diversity or discussion," said one Voice veteran.

On another recent occasion, there was disagreement over how much of Sen. Thomas

Dodd's pro-administration speech on Viet Nam should be carried, as against how much of

Sen. Frank Church's anti-administration speech.

A background broadcast had been held up for several days until Church's critical speech was answered, and then the Voice was instructed to call it "not a debate but a discussion."

"We're getting like Radio Moscow," said one Voice official. "That is precisely what they do. They never quote unfavorable editorials."

No Negotiation Commentary

The Voice has not been permitted to send out any background commentary on negotiations for fear it will be misinterpreted as a sign that they are coming. Loomis and others think the Voice has built up a reputation for objectivity and credibility that guards against such misunderstandings.

"Some people think the Voice in a national emergency should be a tactical weapon," says Loomis, "but we think we should be a strategic weapon, building up confidence over the long haul."

Everyone agrees that the Voice was first "bent" during the Cuban missiles crisis of October 1962, when the administration quite frankly "managed" the news. But that was quickly over. People at the Voice are now disturbed about the "heavy handed propaganda line" that has been in effect the last month.

So Loomis' speech was much appreciated. Only, as one of his listeners said, "I wish it had been made by somebody other than a retiring director."

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